



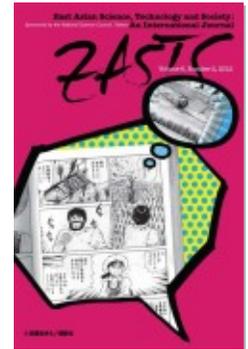
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Disengaging from “Asia”

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Abstract While the emerging field of (East) Asian STS presents a wealth of opportunities, it also raises a number of issues that bear further examination. This essay briefly discusses the ways that categories of identity shape the project of STS in and of Asia and the consequences that arise for scholarly practice within the discipline.

Keywords Asia • identity • STS

We define ourselves in relation to categories of identity: I am Italian American, half-Jewish, Anglophone, curly headed. Similarly, we invoke categories to shape the nature and bounds of our research: I work on the history of science, the history of China, STS, the medical humanities. Each of these categories represents a way of being in the world, as an individual or an academic researcher. As scholars, our categories help define our academic fields and thus help determine our intellectual and professional communities in important ways.

Although engaging with the emerging field of (East) Asian STS presents a wealth of scholarly opportunities, it also raises a number of issues that merit some degree of self-reflexivity about the categories invoked in the process. In this short piece, I briefly address why it matters to take identification seriously in our work as scholars of a regionally defined subdiscipline of STS. Specifically, I am interested in the ways that categories shape the project of STS in and of Asia.

I come to STS as a historian of science. Bringing a historical perspective to science studies is useful in contextualizing knowledge production and, in doing so, in urging us to rethink the ideas, objects, and terms that shape our work. One effective way to do this is to try to understand concepts as historically contingent, emerging in particular contexts and potentially transforming over their life histories. One set of concepts that bears further contextualization is the “local,” “native,” “traditional,” or “indigenous,” especially when invoked to describe a “way of knowing” or a particular culture of knowledge making. Historians, sociologists, and anthropologists of science have produced a growing body of scholarship that looks at the importance of local cultures of

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science, technology, and medicine. But there's a trick—by invoking categories of the local or indigenous in our work, we are simultaneously helping to create them. And with that power comes responsibility.

In order to engage that responsibility, I attempt to disaggregate the category of local knowledge making that has inspired this roundtable, that of “Asia.” This is a formidable task, and my goal here is modest: I aim to gently loosen the threads that entangle the concept within the STS field by posing a series of questions about “Asia” and STS through three forms of their relationship that are often blurred together: Asia as a locality, a community, and an alternative within STS. Though this conceptual blurring is not unique to Asian STS, it has characterized what it has meant for STS to “engage with Asia,” and thus it is worth spending a few minutes to think about the potential dangers that accompany the vast opportunities provided by this engagement.¹

Is Asian STS the study of the science, technology, and society of Asia (STS *about* Asia)? Recent years have seen a historiographical turn to a scholarly focus on local or indigenous practices alongside the globalizing of history of science as a field. The existence of *EASTS* as a journal reflects the importance that Asia has taken on within the wider field of local or indigenous STS. While this is in many ways a wonderful development, it has raised some methodological issues. One of the most fundamental is the broader question of the nature of the local in STS: What does it mean to talk about a locally situated scientific practice, and in what ways do approaches that identify practices with particular localities create or reify nationally, ethnically, geographically, or politically defined categories? Naming or invoking a category gives it power. Identifying a kind of knowledge or practice with a locality (both in space, e.g., East Asia or Asia, and in time, e.g., the “indigenous”) or with group identities associated with that locality can assume, and empower the idea of, the coherence of both. The epistemological problems posed by this lack of critical attention are fairly obvious and include the challenge of defining what counts as “Asia” for the purpose of defining STS of/about Asia—there is still a tendency in North American historiography of science, for example, to optimistically invoke “Asia” when what we really mean (or what we are effectively talking about) is East Asia or China. A further problem arises from reading modern or contemporary notions of Asia back into historical documents and anachronistically using them to describe phenomena prior to or outside the emergence of “Asia” as a coherent concept. Finally, an uncritical acceptance of this identification of a knowledge or practice with a particular local context or community can effectively racialize or ethnicize that knowledge or practice.

Is Asian STS the scholarly study of science, technology, and society as that scholarship is produced within Asia? If so, what joins practitioners of Asian STS together in a coherent identity? Focusing on a particular case might make the question clearer. What, for example, is “Korean” about Korean STS? Furthermore, what is the relationship between Korean STS and STS projects that take Korea as the locality of inquiry or the subject of analysis? There are various ways to answer this question, based in some common assumptions that tend to underlie contemporary practice: it is STS scholarship done within Korea, or perhaps in the Korean language, or maybe by individuals

¹ I treat the broader issue of “Asia” here because that was the purview of the History of Science Society/Society for the History of Technology roundtable at which we initially gathered, but the discussion here also extends to other categories, including East Asia, China, and Japan.

who self-identify as Korean (regardless of where they live or work). These ways of construing identity are each rooted in historically contingent notions of "Korea" or "Korean" that have emerged from very particular contexts, with each notion inviting assumptions of its own, be they assumptions about the identity of Korea as a geopolitical unit, the definition of a community based in the shared use of the spoken or written Korean language, or the nature of Korea as an imagined community.

An Asian STS does not necessarily need to affirm or be based in uncritical acceptance of assumed identities ("Asian," "East Asian," etc.). Indeed, one of the great opportunities enabled by Asian STS is that it can join scholars from many different communities together into a larger group who support each other's work in ways that would be impossible without a field defined so broadly. At the same time, however, construing (even partially) a field according to the location or identity of its practitioners can bring unintended repercussions. Among the more detrimental of these is the tendency to assume that members of a particular community have privileged access to insights about the history or social study of that community. We need to remain vigilant against the assumption that those who would speak on such topics have a privileged perspective if they self-identify (or are identified by others) in particular ethnic, national, or racial terms. This is part of a broader set of assumptions about authority and identity in the production of historical knowledge that we caution our students against in the context of undergraduate teaching—should you put greater trust in what I say about women's history because I am a woman?—but I am constantly surprised to find how pervasive it can still be in our professional communities.

Is Asian STS the study of the science and technology of an exemplary case of something we might broadly define as the non-West? The answer to this, of course, is a resounding "No." I bring this up not because I fear that readers of this journal might commit this error, but because otherwise well-intentioned support of the field, and of work conducted therein, can be based in this kind of assumption. As the historical and social studies of science increasingly turn to a more encompassing, plural vision of what should be included under the purview of science studies, there can be a well-meaning but ultimately damaging attitude of "we need something non-Western in here" (in collections of essays, in journals, in workshops or conference panels, in slates of job candidates short-listed for academic positions). It is important that Asian STS is not merely defined in terms of its alterity with respect to a dominant STS discourse, thus potentially marginalizing (at best) or Orientalizing (at worst) a vibrant area of scholarly inquiry.

What, then, is Asian STS the study of? What is it that we are doing when we engage with "Asia," and what makes all of the practices that fall under this rubric part of the same conversation? This matters both intellectually and materially. The intellectual challenge posed by this endeavor is that invoking Asia (or the West, East Asia, the indigenous, etc.) as a category of analysis can undermine our efforts to help ourselves and our readers rethink the stability and coherence of those categories. This problem also manifests in material terms, however, as these categories can determine the allocation of resources to scholars, the inclusion in or exclusion from communities defined by categories of identity, and the positioning of those communities within a larger intellectual and professional field of STS. One productive way forward is a vigilant self-reflexivity in considering what we are talking about when we talk about "Asian STS," explicitly engaging the challenges posed by this concept alongside the

opportunities. Historians of the modern world have developed increasingly sophisticated ways to study the construction of identity as a process rather than taking it for granted as a static object, and the field would benefit from a more sustained attention to those discussions in the course of its self-fashioning.